Canada Among Nations 2013: Canada-Africa Relations, Looking Back, Looking Ahead

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Canada has historically been very supportive of African countries’ efforts to promote socioeconomic development. While being the case, the perceived indifference towards Africa since the Conservative government under the leadership of Stephen Harper assumed office in 2006 could not have been more evident. Although announcing recently that it would provide financial support to African countries to develop their infrastructure, as well as launching the Muskoka Initiative (MI), which seeks to promote maternal, child and new-born health, there is no denying that the Conservative government of Canada’s attitude towards African countries can at best be described as distant and indifference. From reducing aid to Africa, shifting the focus and aid assistance from African countries to countries in Latin America, as well as incorporating the aid agency, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), into the newly-created Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (DFATD), the general consensus is that the Government of Canada’s focus on aid under Stephen Harper is to serve its

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foreign policy and trade interests. Thus, the publication of the 27th edition of Canada Among Nations, which deals with Canada’s relations with Africa, could not have been much timelier.

In examining the nature of the relations between Canada and Africa, the book with contributions by a wide range of scholars, is organized into five broad themes and areas: diplomacy and foreign policy; security and conflict management; trade, investment and governance; development and health; and research capacity. Following a foreword by former Canadian Prime Minister, Paul Martin, who outlines the relationship between Canada and Africa, and the introductory chapter by Rohinton Medhora and Yiagaddees Samy that sets out the focus of the book, the theme on diplomacy and foreign policy is began with a discussion by David Elder of the diplomatic history that Canada has had with Africa over the past century. Following that is an examination by David Hornsby of Canada’s relations with South Africa, which he notes has declined considerably since the end of apartheid. Hornsby therefore calls for a renewal and improvement in this relationship as part of the broader efforts to engage with the region. Canada’s engagement with Africa is also taken up by David Carment, Milana Nikolkop and Dacia Douhaibi in their discussion of Canada’s policy towards the African Diaspora. Using the cases of Sudan/South Sudan and Somalia communities in Canada, the authors argue that Canada can at best be described as having an inconsistent or non-existent policy towards the African Diaspora. However, they suggest that this approach needs to change if Canada is to leverage the diaspora community in its foreign policy agenda. This section is concluded by Chris Brown who also notes the inconsistency in Canada’s relationship and engagement in Africa, which he explains largely by Canada’s lack of core national interests on the African continent.

The section on security and conflict management starts with a discussion by Robert Rotberg who argues that despite the economic and political strides made by a number of countries in Africa, security challenges remain. For him, educational deficits, inadequate infrastructure, burgeoning population, civil conflicts, and poor governance strategies pose significant threats to development in Africa. The only way out from this predicament, Rotberg notes, is for African countries to embark on good governance and have strong leaders who would steer their countries in the right direction. Rotberg’s discussion is followed by that of Evan Hoffman who states that although there have been some improvements in Canada’s post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding efforts, not only have these been piecemeal in nature, but also they lack focus and are ill-defined. These
are exacerbated by the lack of financial support for peacebuilding activities, and the increasing perception of Canada not being a trusted mediator in conflicts in Africa. To this end, Hoffman suggests that Canada needs to recognize the linkage between peace, security and development, and also have both short-term and long term approaches to peacebuilding. This section is concluded by Edward Ansah Akuffo who argues that Canada is informed by its moral identity on the African continent, which in turn has prevented it from promoting the long-term national interest of Canada. Nonetheless, he suggests that this ‘morality approach’ must be backed up by substantial material and financial support to promote peace, security and development.

The third section of the book, which deals with the broad issue of trade, investment and governance, begins with Victoria Schorr and Paul Hitschfeld's argument that Canada has not been at par with the rest of the world when it comes to investing in Africa. They note that trade volume between Canada and Africa is small because of similarity of exports and the lack of traction in Africa of various market access initiatives by Canada. For them, addressing the wrong perception that Africa’s business opportunities are limited would go a long way to improve the existing low trade relations between Canada and African countries. Building on that theme, Hany Besada and Philip Martin discuss the regulatory regime, liberalized environment as well as good governance initiatives taking place in the mining sector on the African continent. They note that given the lack of capacity of host nations, many African countries would face difficulties in ‘policing’ the sector. It is in this regard that they call for the promotion of good governance in the form of transparency and accountability, as well as undertake economic policies that would improve the socio-economic lot of all citizens. This argument is in keeping with that advanced by Ian Smillie in the next chapter, who also argues that mismanagement of diamonds and other natural resources have been the cause of much of the conflict and challenges of many African countries. Smillie states that Canada has taken a leadership role with good governance initiatives such as the Kimberley Process to stem the tide of selling ‘blood diamonds.’ However, he argues that unless issues relating to non-compliance and consensual decision-making are addressed, these good governance initiatives would prove fruitless.

Opening the discussion on the broad topic of development and health, Stephen Brown brings to the fore the trends of Canada’s aid policy to Africa, highlighting how commercial interests of Canadian businesses is currently driving
aid policy. In addition to countries with natural resources being more likely to be the major beneficiaries with this approach, he contends that a disparate approach as opposed to a grand strategy has been the hallmark of Canada’s aid policy towards African countries. Bill Morton picks up on that argument by noting the concerns with this approach to Canadian aid. He points out that the rise of non-traditional providers (NTP) of aid such as the Brazil, Russia, India and China have severe implications for the current Canadian approach. With Canada lacking a broad and strategic approach to aid, he calls for local country ownership, few conditionalities, speedy delivery of aid, and owning up to self-interest in order to improve aid delivery to African countries. The discussions by Betty Plewes and Brian Tomlinson are focused on the place of Canadian civil society organizations (CSOs) in Africa since the 1960s. Noting the increasing challenges that face CSOs, they hold the view that the ‘collaborative, responsive and flexible’ relationship that characterized the activities of CSOs in Africa has been destroyed by the current Conservative government of Canada. Thus, they suggest that a meeting between Canadian and African CSOs to address these ongoing challenges would be a step in the right direction.

The relationship between Canada and the African Development Bank (AfDB) is the focus of discussion by Bruce Montador. Seen as an important multilateral partner for Canada, he believes that there are a number of areas that Canada can advance its role and influence on the AfDB. These include encouraging more participation by emerging donors, promoting regional integration and helping resource-rich countries to have the right regulatory approach to deal with the boom-and-bust cycles associated with natural resources. David Black continues the discussion by looking at the Muskoka Initiative, which he sees as part of the current Canadian government to reclaim its moral and ethical identity. Notwithstanding the fact that it is a laudable initiative, David Black states that the secrecy surrounding its implementation as well as the failure of the government to articulate a gendered analytical approach in its aid policy has taken some of the shine off the MI. This, for Black, is indicative of the disconnect in Canada’s stated aid objectives and how it is actually delivered. Victor Neufeld concludes the discussion on health by pointing out that despite some improvements, Canada’s health research efforts in Africa since 2000 have been constrained by fragmented investments, and imbalance in research partnership and inadequate knowledge translation. The solution, Neufeld notes, lies not only in Canada ensuring that its health research investments are congruent with the priorities and interests of its
African partners, but also that the unequal power dynamics between the partners does not hinder collaboration. More importantly, he calls for supporting the health research community and translating their discoveries to practical policy outcomes.

The final section of the book, which focuses on research capacity, begins with John Cockburn and Diéry Seck discussing the past relationship and engagement between Canada and francophone African countries in the area of human capacity building. They note that through International Development Research Center (IDRC) grant funding and graduate training among others, there has been an increase in the capacity of a number of countries. While recent cutbacks have reduced the support being provided, they call for renewed efforts in research and capacity building in francophone Africa through tertiary and graduate training and making local know-how part of development efforts. Taking it a step further, Jeffrey Fine and Peter Szyszlo argue that the long-standing academic ties, especially at the tertiary and institutional capacity building level between Canada and African countries needs to strengthened even further given the increasing demand for post-secondary education in Africa, which is being undermined by the lack of resources and capacity to meet those demands. The book is concluded by Gerald Helleiner who provides an overview of the main arguments in the previous chapters and particularly calls for policy-relevant research between Canada and Africa on Canada-Africa relationship and a coherent strategy by Canada in the process.

In sum, the book is an excellent piece that adds a lot to the literature and ongoing discussions on Canada's place in the international community, especially on its relationship with Africa. As a book that can be used as a required text for undergraduate students in Development Studies and Canadian Foreign Policy, a unique and striking feature is that besides bringing together leading scholars, experts and practitioners to examine the nature of the relationships that Canada has with African countries, the various chapters provide a wealth of analytical discussion and also make use of solid evidence to support the arguments advanced in the various chapters. In particular, a common theme of the various contributions is that despite the perceived indifference of the current Canadian government to issues pertaining to Africa, there is no denying that Africa represents an area of the world where economic activities seem to be booming. While not discounting the challenges such as high incidence of poverty, civil wars and conflicts, low standards of living, problems with diseases, which have
beeviled African countries, the authors note that Africa still holds lots of potential and promise, which Canada cannot discount. With Africa poised to experience increasing economic growth in the twenty-first century, it would be a strategic blunder for Canada to ignore that reality and not be part of the gains that other countries in partnership with Africa are likely to enjoy. It is in this vein that the authors in the various chapters spell out concrete and specific policy initiatives to deal with the problem of poverty, general underdevelopment in Africa and how Canada can be a leader in ensuring that the myriad of challenges facing African countries are dealt with. The recommendations from the book would help position Canada to take the lead in terms of policy direction on issues relating to aid and development in Africa, and also ensure an aid delivery approach that is not only strategic in nature but also mutually beneficial to both Canada and African countries.